

Symptoms

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Mild to moderate dehydration is likely to cause:

- Dry, sticky mouth
- Sleepiness or tiredness — children are likely to be less active than usual
- Thirst
- Decreased urine output
- No wet diapers for three hours for infants
- Few or no tears when crying
- Dry skin
- Headache
- Constipation
- Dizziness or lightheadedness

Severe dehydration, a medical emergency, can cause:

- Extreme thirst
- Extreme fussiness or sleepiness in infants and children; irritability and confusion in adults
- Very dry mouth, skin and mucous membranes
- Little or no urination — any urine that is produced will be darker than normal
- Sunken eyes
- Shriveled and dry skin that lacks elasticity and doesn't "bounce back" when pinched into a fold
- In infants, sunken fontanel — the soft spots on the top of a baby's head
- Low blood pressure
- Rapid heartbeat
- Rapid breathing
- No tears when crying
- Fever
- In the most serious cases, delirium or unconsciousness

Unfortunately, thirst isn't always a reliable gauge of the body's need for water, especially in children and older adults. A better indicator is the color of your urine: Clear or light-colored urine means you're well hydrated, whereas a dark yellow or amber color usually signals dehydration.

When to see a doctor

If you're a healthy adult, you can usually treat mild to moderate dehydration by drinking more fluids, such as water or a sports drink (Gatorade, Powerade, others). Get immediate medical care if you develop severe signs and symptoms such as extreme thirst, a lack of urination, shriveled skin, dizziness and confusion.

Treat children and older adults with greater caution. Call your family doctor right away if your loved one:

- Develops severe diarrhea, with or without vomiting or fever
- Has bloody or black stool
- Has had moderate diarrhea for 24 hours or more
- Can't keep down fluids
- Is irritable or disoriented and much sleepier or less active than usual
- Has any of the signs or symptoms of mild or moderate dehydration

Go to the nearest hospital emergency room or call 911 or your emergency medical number if you think a child or older adult is severely dehydrated. You can help prevent dehydration from becoming severe by carefully monitoring someone who is sick and giving fluids, such as an oral rehydration solution (CeraLyte, Pedialyte, others), at the first sign of diarrhea, vomiting or fever and by encouraging children to drink plenty of water before, during and after exercise.

Complications

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Dehydration can lead to serious complications, including:

- **Heat injury.** If you don't drink enough fluids when you're exercising vigorously and perspiring heavily, you may end up with a heat injury, ranging in severity from mild heat cramps to heat exhaustion or potentially life-threatening heatstroke.
- **Swelling of the brain (cerebral edema).** Sometimes, when you're getting fluids again after being dehydrated, the body tries to pull too much water back into your cells. This can cause some cells to swell and rupture. The consequences are especially grave when brain cells are affected.
- **Seizures.** Electrolytes — such as potassium and sodium — help carry electrical signals from cell to cell. If your electrolytes are out of balance, the normal electrical messages can become mixed up, which can lead to involuntary muscle contractions and sometimes to a loss of consciousness.
- **Low blood volume shock (hypovolemic shock).** This is one of the most serious, and sometimes life-threatening, complications of dehydration. It occurs when low

blood volume causes a drop in blood pressure and a drop in the amount of oxygen in your body.

- **Kidney failure.** This potentially life-threatening problem occurs when your kidneys are no longer able to remove excess fluids and waste from your blood.
- **Coma and death.** When not treated promptly and appropriately, severe dehydration can be fatal.